

INDEPENDENCE PARK



This report was written on September 6, 1980.

1. Name and location of the property: The property known as Independence Park is situated between the Elizabeth and Piedmont Park neighborhoods in Charlotte, NC. Specifically, portions of the original park, including the Sunnyside Rose Garden, are located on five tracts. They are: 1). 9.55 acres between N. Kings Dr. and East Independence Blvd., 2). 16.9 acres between East Independence Blvd. and N. Hawthorne Lane, 3). 6.67 acres between N. Hawthorne Lane and Park Dr. 4). .441 acres at the intersection of Insurance Ln. and E. Seventh St., and 5) .215 acres at the intersection of Rose Garden Terrace and Sunnyside Ave.

2. Name, address, telephone number of the present owner of the property:

The present owner of the property is:

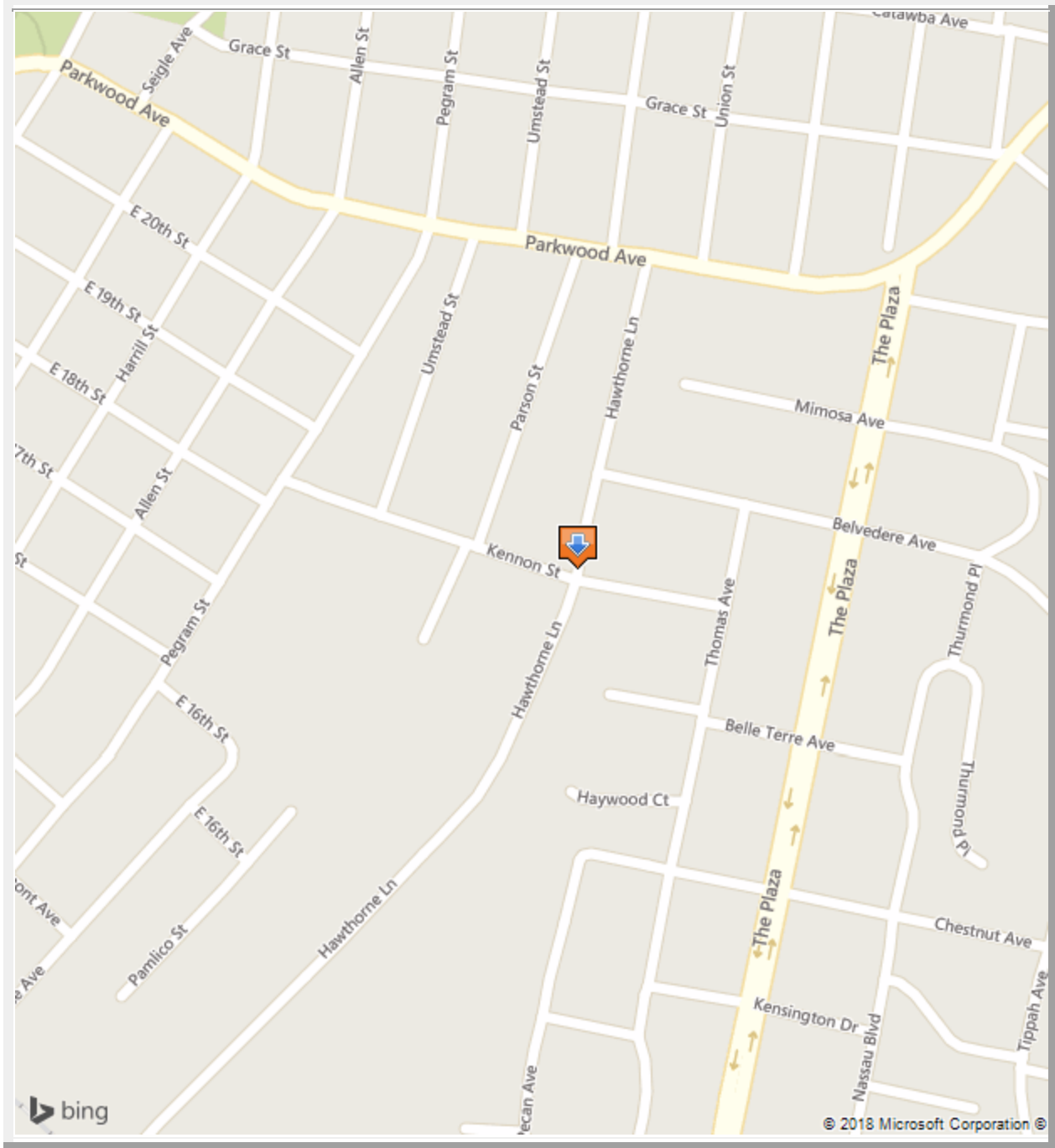
The City of Charlotte
600 E. Trade St.
Charlotte, N.C. 28202

Telephone: (704) 374-2241

3. Representative photographs of the property: This report contains representative photographs of the property.



4. A map depicting the locations of the property: This report contains maps which depict the locations of the property.



Click on the map to browse

5. Current Deed Book Reference: The subject property has several deeds, the listing of which is superfluous for purposes of this report. The current Tax Parcel Numbers of the property are: 080-171-01, 080-192-01, 080-218-01, 080-219-01 and 127-034-16.

6. A brief historical sketch of the property:

Daniel Augustus Tompkins (1851-1914), noted industrialist, founder of the *Charlotte Observer* and spokesman for the principles and policies of the New South movement, was responsible for the establishment of Independence Park, the first public park in Charlotte.¹ As early as 1894, when Edward Dilworth Latta (1851-1925), president of the Charlotte Consolidated Construction Company, had offered Latta Park in Dilworth for sale to the City, the *Charlotte Observer*, Tompkins's newspaper, had supported the establishment of a municipal park system.² In August 1901, the newspaper renewed its commitment, declaring that "all cities of consequence own their parks."³ On March 7, 1904, Tompkins appeared before the Board of Aldermen in his capacity as president of the Southern Manufacturer's Club, an organization that represented the leading entrepreneurs in the city. In keeping with his reputation as an effective and resourceful advocate, Tompkins amassed an impressive aggregate of materials and arguments in favor of his contention that Charlotte needed a public park. No doubt aware that the Board practiced frugality in all financial matters, Tompkins suggested that the park be placed at the former site of the municipal waterworks, thereby eliminating the need for the City to purchase land. He pointed out that the property would be served by two trolley lines, the Piedmont Park line and the Elizabeth College line and, therefore, would be readily accessible to the rank-and-file citizens of Charlotte. The most compelling argument which Tompkins advanced, however, was that public parks were a prudent and wise investment because they improved the moral and economic climates in cities. In support of this claim, Tompkins quoted from letters that elected officials in several communities had written to him such as Savannah, GA, Richmond, VA., Charleston, SC, Mobile, AL, Chattanooga, TN, and Toledo, OH.



D. A. Tompkins

At its meeting on March 7, 1904, the Board of Aldermen responded affirmatively to Tompkins's proposal and appointed Tompkins to head a special committee to oversee the project.⁵ He toured the site on April 23, 1904, with engineers from the City and discussed preliminary plans for the park.⁶ During the summer of 1904, Tompkins also negotiated with the owners of nearby property to secure the donation of additional land. He was successful. On August 1, 1904, Tompkins presented the deeds for approximately 47.5 acres of land to the Board of Aldermen, including

12.85 acres from the Highland Park Realty Co., developers of Elizabeth, and 5.57 acres from the Piedmont Realty Co., developers of Piedmont Park. The acceptance of this property by the City assured that the park would become a reality.⁷ The *Charlotte Observer* greeted this news joyously. "It will unquestionably prove a blessing to the community, and public spirited men are unsparing in the gratification of its assured certainty," the newspaper proclaimed.⁸ D. A. Tompkins explained at length the benefits which he believed the park would provide for Charlotte and especially for the industrial laborers who resided there. "We are increasing our industrial population, and many of our laboring men do not have an opportunity to get out into the country but once a week, on Sundays," he explained. "It is a good thing for them to have a park such as this will be."⁹

Interestingly, especially in relation to subsequent developments, Tompkins advocated that the park remain as much as possible in its natural state. "Put a few walks and drives through it, set out a few trees where the work of nature has been destroyed, but for the rest, 'let it be,'" he advised.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Independence Park has not been as fortunate in retaining its natural setting as Tompkins had desired. On October 21, 1904, the *Charlotte Observer* reported that the City had selected the name Independence Park.¹¹ The Board of Aldermen created a Park and Tree Commission on November 7, 1904, to supervise the construction of the facility. Not surprisingly, Tompkins became chairman.¹² The Commission moved ahead with dispatch. By June 1905, it had established contact with several landscape architects for purposes of soliciting proposals.¹³ The winner of this competition was John Nolen (1869-1937), a student in the School of Landscape Architecture at Harvard University. The design of Independence Park was the initial commission in what would become an illustrious career. Nolen was one of the premier landscape architects and comprehensive planners in the United States.¹⁴ It is noteworthy that Tompkins and his associates would demonstrate such care in selecting the designer for Independence Park. This scrutiny was a manifestation of their commitment to making Charlotte a grand and majestic city. In the opinion of the *Charlotte News*, it was the duty of the Park and Tree Commission "to make Charlotte famous for the beauty of its parks."¹⁵

John Nolen came to Charlotte in 1905 to supervise the implementation of his plan. During his sojourn in this community, Nolen explained the theories and concepts which undergirded modern landscape architecture. "It is a pleasure to talk with Mr. Nolen," the *Charlotte Observer* asserted. "He lives close to nature. His ideas and ideals are fresh and clean."¹⁶ On April 7, 1906, the *Charlotte Observer* reported that a "handsome driveway" at the upper and at the lower end of Independence Park had been completed.¹⁷ The completion of these improvements, however, did not terminate Nolen's association with the Park and Tree Commission. He returned to Charlotte on several occasions to advise the Commission and to give public lectures. Among the individuals whom he met in this community was George Stephens, a real estate developer and member of the Commission. In 1911, Stephens hired Nolen to design Myers Park, the prestigious streetcar suburb to the east of Charlotte.¹⁸

Independence Park has experienced enormous change since its creation in 1905-06. As early as 1910, the residents of the surrounding neighborhood were clamoring for the expenditure of more public money on maintenance.¹⁹ Rebuffed by the Board of Aldermen, the members of the Commission borrowed funds on their own signatures. In 1914, an experimental playground for children was constructed in the park.²⁰ The City built an Armory-Auditorium in 1929 at the

western end of the park. American Legion Memorial Stadium was completed in 1936. Park Center was erected in the 1950's to replace the Armory-Auditorium, which burned in 1954. In 1957, the City withdrew its plans to locate the Health Department in Independence Park because of the public outcry which this proposal produced in the community.

The Park and Recreation Commission, established in 1927 to replace the Park and Tree Commission, did erect an Arts and Crafts Building at the upper end of the park in 1965, however. Happily, it has been demolished.²¹ Two of the most imposing amenities in Independence Park were the Arhelger Memorial and the Sunnyside Rose Garden. Lillian Arhelger, a twenty-one year old physical education teacher, fell to her death on June 21, 1931, in an attempt to save a young child from falling over the Glen Burnie Falls.²² In appreciation of this heroic and selfless act, the people of Charlotte raised the funds to erect a memorial. It was designed by Helen Hodge, an associate of Earl S. Draper. The memorial was completed in 1931. Happily, the Arhelger Memorial is essentially unchanged from the original.²³ The Sunnyside Rose Garden has not fared as well. The Charlotte Garden Club created the rose garden in 1931. Long recognized as one of the beauty spots in the city, it was destroyed by the construction of Independence Blvd. and the Brookshire Freeway, the former in 1949-50 and the latter in 1960. A reporter for the *Charlotte Observer* wrote a poignant piece shortly before the demise of the rose garden. "The delicate beauty of the roses will be replaced by ribbons of concrete, he lamented. "the fragrance of the flowers will be wafted out of memory by the stench of gasoline. The quiet of the garden will give way to the roar of the motors."²⁴ One wonders what men of the stature of D. A. Tompkins or John Nolen would say if they visited the site today.



The Thies Family at the memorial and celebration for [Lillian Arhelger](#) at Independence Park.



Frank Thies Sr., Lillian Arhelger's brother in law.

NOTES:

¹ For a review of the career of Daniel Augustus Tompkins, see Howard Bunyan Clay, "Daniel Augustus Tompkins: An American Bourbon." (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1950). An unpublished doctoral dissertation.

² *The Charlotte Observer* (April 3, 1894), p. 4. *The Charlotte Observer* (July 17, 1894), p. 1.

³ *The Charlotte Observer* (August 18, 1901), p. 4.

⁴ Charlotte Board of Aldermen Minute Book 9, p. 232. *The Charlotte News* (March 8, 1904), p. 3. *The Charlotte Observer* (March 6, 1904), *The Charlotte Observer* (March 8, 1904), p. 5.

⁵ Charlotte Board of Aldermen Minute Book 9, p. 232.

⁶ *The Charlotte Observer* (April 24, 1904), p. 5.

⁷ *The Charlotte Observer* (August 2, 1904), p. 5. Charlotte Board of Aldermen Minute Book 9, p. 244.

⁸ *The Charlotte Observer* (August 5, 1904), p. 6.

⁹ *The Charlotte Observer* (August 2, 1904), p. 5.

¹⁰ *The Charlotte News* (August 2, 1904), p. 3.

¹¹ *The Charlotte Observer* (October 21, 1904), p. 5.

¹² Charlotte Board of Aldermen Minute Book 9, p. 248. *The Charlotte News* (November 8, 1904), p. 4. *The Charlotte Observer* (November 8, 1904), p. 6.

¹³ *The Charlotte News* (June 6, 1905), p. 6. *The Charlotte Observer* (June 6, 1905), p. 5.

¹⁴ Robert Livingston Schlyler, ea., Edward T. James, assoc. ed., *Dictionary of American Biography* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958), Vol. 22 (Supplement Two), pp. 490-491.

¹⁵ *The Charlotte News* (November 8, 1904), p. 4.

¹⁶ *The Charlotte Observer* (May 8, 1906), p. 6.

¹⁷ *The Charlotte Observer* (April 7, 1906), p. 5.

¹⁸ *Charlotte Evening Chronicle* (November 6, 1911), p. 6.

¹⁹ *Charlotte Evening Chronicle* (April 16, 1910), p. 7. *The Charlotte Observer* (October 11, 1910), p. 7.

²⁰ *The Charlotte Observer* (December 6, 1910), p. 5. *The Charlotte Observer* (June 18, 1915), p. 3.

²¹ Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office. "Charlotte. Public Buildings." A folder in the vertical files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

²² *The Charlotte News* (June 22, 1931), p. 1.

²³ *The Charlotte News* (June 23, 1931), p. 1. *The Charlotte News* (July 10, 1931) p. 1 & 9. Earl S. Draper, an associate of John Nolen's, located in Charlotte and oversaw the planting of trees along the streets of Myers Park.

²⁴ "Charlotte Streets. To 1966." A folder in the vertical files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library. "Charlotte. Gardens-Gardening." A folder in the vertical files of the Carolina Room of the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Public Library.

7. A brief architectural description of the property: This report contains an architectural description by Jack O. Boyte, A.I.A.

8. Documentation of why and in what ways the property meets the criteria set forth in N. C. G. S. 160A-399.4:

a. Special significance in terms of its history, architecture, and/or cultural importance: The Commission judges that the property known as Independence Park does possess special significance in terms of Charlotte-Mecklenburg. The Commission bases its judgment on the

following considerations: 1) Independence Park is the oldest public park in Charlotte; 2) D. A. Tompkins, a New South leader of regional importance, was responsible for the creation of Independence Park; 3) Independence Park was the initial design executed by John Nolen, a landscape architect and comprehensive planner of national renown.

b. Integrity of design, setting, workmanship, materials, feeling and/or association: Obviously, much of Independence Park has been destroyed or seriously comprised. However, the Commission judges that that portion of the park from the grove of trees at the Arhelger Memorial eastward does retain its essential integrity.

9. Ad Valorem Tax Appraisal: The Commission is aware that designation would allow the owner to apply annually for an automatic deferral of 50% of the Ad Valorem taxes on all or any portion of the property which becomes historic property. The subject property is owned by the City of Charlotte and is, therefore, not subject to Ad Valorem taxes.

Bibliography

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Edward Bunyan Clay, "Daniel Augustus Tompkins: An American Bourbon." (Chapel Hill, NC, 1950). An unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Register of Deeds Office.

Records of the Mecklenburg County Tax Office.

Robert Livingston Schlyler, ea., Edward T. Jumps, assoc. ea., *Dictionary of American Biography* (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1958), Vol. 22 (Supplement Two).

Date of Preparation of this Report: September 6, 1980.

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Architectural Description

The earliest recreation area owned by the City of Charlotte was Independence Park, located just east of Sugar Creek between Elizabeth Avenue and Monroe Road. Fortunately, the city authorities decided to seek professional help in planning the park. They retained a talented, young landscape architect, John Nolen, who was later to achieve renown for his work on Myers Park. Nolen's 1905 design was obviously intended to preserve and enhance the existing features of the lake valley. The quiet informality of his plan retained the rural setting and established a lasting natural landscape. At the eastern end of the park land, where it straddles the earth bridge of Hawthorne Lane, the half mile long, tree shaded valley remains much as it has been for three quarters of a century. Nolen made generous use of planting, and many of the trees he started have matured into magnificent old oaks, poplars and maples interspersed later with flowering shrubs. Footpaths wander through the park, and occasional old granite benches in small, grassy nooks offer havens from the bustle of nearby city streets. In its early years, the lake, and later the park, was bordered by a shoreline road.

This road, now called Park Drive, was paved in the 1920's when many of the dirt streets in Elizabeth were improved. Vertical slabs of Mecklenburg granite bordered most early paved streets. This stone curbing has been replaced with concrete in most city streets; however, portions of Park Drive still retain the picturesque old granite curbing. At the eastern-end, the park is circled by cottages built during the early years of this century. The architectural style is typical of the times and adds much to the charm of the park setting. For its first twenty five years, Independence Park was a rural sanctuary -- a place to rest beside a spring fed brook. As the neighborhood grew, however, playground facilities were added. A grammar school was placed on the side near Elizabeth Avenue. Tennis courts were built on the opposite hillside, and a portion of the valley was filled to create baseball and football fields.

At the lower end, near Sugar Creek, the valley was molded into a vast open air amphitheater. In the year 1931, the busy playground which filled the park beside the school became the setting for a beautiful memorial garden. Built to honor a school teacher who died tragically in a vain attempt to save a falling child in the North Carolina mountains, the Lillian Arhelger Memorial blends into the eastern end of the playground basin beside the sloping side of Hawthorne Lane.

Here landscape designer Helen Hodge was commissioned by the Charlotte High School students to create an enduring memorial to honor their friend and teacher. The rustic stone and timber garden setting, with its flowing water, offers a rare and inviting resting place for many visitors, young and old. The garden features a stone lined reflecting pool, used regularly for wading, mostly by children. Rustling water tumbles down a nearby stone wall and fills the pond. A bronze plaque on the wall describes the courageous act commemorated by the garden. Stone walks sweep in a wide oval at the water's edge, and beyond this are terraced benches, also of stone, which form a natural border. At the far end is a cedar roofed shelter for picnicking, and at one side a shallow stone sand pit.